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PUBLIC HEALTH

Teenage pregnancies: A global problem

Although the population growth of the world has fallen off slightly since 1965, teenage pregnancies are rising, thanks to adolescents menstruating earlier in life and moving to cities where they have greater sexual freedom. Of 15 million female teenagers in the world, 15 percent are mothers.

These findings are reported in the July POPULATION REPORTS issued by the Population Information Program of George Washington University Medical Center. According to the author, William Burr Hunt Jr. of the PIP, the dangers are not just overpopulation but medical risks. Teenage mothers are more likely to die in childbirth than older mothers, and their babies are more likely to be of low birth weight that in turn is linked with mental retardation, epilepsy and other birth defects.

There is an enormous need to make birth control available to teenagers around the world, Hunt stresses. A major source of help, he says, are planned parenthood centers in various countries, including the United States. American teenagers can also contact local and state health departments or their family doctors for help. Nearly all states now allow teenagers to receive contraceptives without the consent of their parents.

Light and health

Until several years ago, not much attention was paid to the effects of light and individual light spectra on human health. More and more evidence has been building since then, however, to suggest that light and its individual wavelengths are indeed crucial, and this evidence in turn is triggering still more scientific interest in the subject.

For instance, John Ott, a pioneer photobiologist and director of the Environmental Health and Light Research Institute in Sarasota, Fla., reported that improper fluorescent lighting in schoolrooms in Sarasota could trigger hyperactivity in children (SN: 4/20/74, p. 258). Now the Chicago school system has received a federal grant of \$10 million for classroom construction and controlled experiments in classroom lighting, and Ott will serve as consultant in these studies.

What's more, Ott's numerous light experiments have led Roswell Park Memorial Institute, a prestigious cancer research center in Buffalo, N.Y., to set up a Center for Light Research. The center will focus on whether certain wavelengths of light promote or inhibit tumor growth, according to Cora Saltarelli, the scientist who heads the center.

Monitor for illegal methadone

Methadone has been successfully used to treat heroin addiction, but several problems have plagued treatment programs. Among them is the tendency of some patients to boost their intake with illegal street methadone.

Canadian researchers at the University of Toronto and the Addiction Research Foundation in Toronto have developed a new way to tag methadone chemically so drug therapists could tell if an addict were supplementing his dose from the clinic. J.C. Hsia, J.C.L. Tam, H.G. Giles, C.C. Leung, H. Marcus, J.A. Marshman and A.E. LeBlanc report the technique in the Aug. 6 SCIENCE.

The team tagged methadone with deuterium, then tested the new drug called trideuteriomethadone or methadone-d₃ on laboratory rats. The tests show that methadone-d₃ is equivalent to the untagged drug in toxicity, pain killing and drug activity. The substance can be detected in the urine with gas-chromatography-mass-spectroscopy, and the ratio between excretion of this and street methadone could provide a "simple, sensitive, specific and reasonably inexpensive" monitoring method.